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INTELLIGENCE

PREPARED STATEMENT FOR THE PUBLIC RECORD CONCERNING VA FACILITIES IN COLUMBUS, OHIO

August 25, 2003

Department of Veterans Affairs
CARES Committee Members
Everett Alvarez Jr., Chairman

Dear Committee Members,

Ohio is the home of more than 1 million veterans, making Ohio the 6th largest state in terms of veteran population nationwide. Ohio's veterans are provided quality services through the resources of a variety of Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Centers, Community Based Outpatient Clinics, and when needed, contractor services. I am proud of Ohio's veterans and am grateful for the many accomplishments and sacrifices that they have made to serve our Nation and protect our freedom and democracy.

I strongly support providing America's veterans with the best available health care services and remain committed to doing what I can to enhance the health care access and associated services for those who have done so much for our country. Veterans in the central Ohio area receive services through the existing Columbus Outpatient Clinic, a facility that is designed to provide services to approximately 135,000 veterans. Yet at present, the Columbus Outpatient Clinic provides services to more than 200,000 veterans -- far more than what the design capacity of the existing facility is capable of supporting. In addition, I find it distressing that VA officials have relied on a series of building leases as a manner of business practice to provide services to veterans in the central Ohio region. I find it very hard to understand how a city like Columbus -- the 15th largest city in the United States -- is served by the resources of an outpatient clinic versus the greater range of services that the Department of Veterans Affairs provides to comparable veteran populations in other regions throughout the United States.

Veterans of the central Ohio region have been denied the full range of available resources for many years due in part to the limited ability of the existing Outpatient Clinic to provide the full range of health care access for veterans. Dr. Thome and her staff have done everything they can to make the best of this situation. But, at the end of the day, one can clearly see that additional space is needed to adequately provide quality services to the veterans of central Ohio.

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I support the expansion of services for our veterans in central Ohio and endorse the proposed construction of an Ambulatory Care Center that will provide the much needed relief for veterans who now are sent to various Ohio VA facilities for services that cannot be provided in Columbus. The construction of the Ambulatory Surgery Center also will represent a much-needed long-term commitment to veterans in this area because it will be the first VA-owned structure in the Columbus area. I believe this action will reflect positively on the goal to provide veterans the services they need, where they are needed. Beyond that, the issue of ambulatory surgery services is an even larger issue involving the provision of in-patient hospital care. At present, veterans from the central Ohio area who need in-patient hospitalization are sent to VA medical centers in Chillicothe, Dayton, Cincinnati, or Cleveland. I find this practice unacceptable for any number of reasons, including the increased burden on family members to travel great distances and the increased risk to the individual veteran who must face transportation to facilities outside of the central Ohio region.

I appreciate the time and consideration that the CARES Committee has devoted to evaluating the needs of one of our most valuable resources in our nation -- our veterans. I also appreciate and respect your mission to positively impact the quality of life for those who have done so much for our country. It is vital that we do all we can to improve the health care options for central Ohio's veterans and request your favorable consideration of my views on this subject.

Very respectfully yours,



Mike DeWine
United States Senator

RMD/kr

Statement of Congressman Dave Hobson

**Before the
Department of Veterans Affairs
CARES Commission
August 19, 2003 Public Field Hearing
Columbus, Ohio**

I.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here and to testify on this distinguished panel. I think it is a wonderful to see so many visitors and stakeholders here today showing their support of our nation's veterans.

I am testifying today as the elected Representative to Congress from Ohio's 7th Congressional District. However, I am also a veteran, and a Member of the VA, HUD, and Independent Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee that helps determine the funding priorities of the Department of Veterans Affairs. No matter which hat I am wearing, I can see clearly that something needs to be done for the ever-increasing veteran population in Central Ohio.

II.

The estimated 250,000 veterans now living in Central Ohio are in an undesirable situation. Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES) access analysis shows that a significant gap exists for primary and specialty care for the veterans living in Central Ohio. Seventy-one percent of the veterans residing within the Central market are within the 30-minute drive time CARES guideline for access to primary care while only thirty-nine percent within market boundaries are within the 60-minute travel time for access to hospital care.

The current Chalmers P. Wylie VA Outpatient Clinic in Columbus has a high quality, professional medical staff, but the facility itself is woefully inadequate for the needs of area veterans. Originally, this clinic was to handle 135,000 annual visits, but last year it saw more than 192,000; fully 42 percent more than intended with the original design.

Over the years, far too many veterans have had to travel up to three hours to receive for example, magnetic resonance imaging, or MRI, at larger VA medical centers in Cleveland, Cincinnati and elsewhere because of the limited medical services offered by the current 118,000-square-foot clinic. The cost to transfer these veterans has reached several million dollars per year.

In fact, I very recently received a letter from the Fairfield County Veterans Service Commission in which they described the grueling process they must endure just to set up appointments. Their letter then described the hundreds of veterans this year already that

have been transported to Dayton and Cincinnati for fairly routine surgeries. Those numbers will only continue to rise.

I was also told of how these veterans are made to be transported one at a time – further exhausting resources. Ultimately, a new facility would not only save veterans time and insure better service, but it would also save critical funding for area County Veterans Service organizations.

This letter was not alone; I have also received numerous support letters from veterans I represent as well as veterans I don't represent.

To make matters worse the Chalmers P. Wylie facility is bound by a lease that will expire in ten years and is on land not owned by the federal government. If something is not done soon to address the health care access shortfalls, when the lease does expire, it will be the health of our veterans that will ultimately pay the price.

III.

As a result of these compelling facts and figures, I, along with many of my colleagues in Congress, specifically Representatives Tiberi and Pryce, are in full support for the central market proposal for the construction of a new veterans' clinic to be located on the Defense Supply Center, Columbus (DSCC) campus.

Since the new location will be on federally-owned land, significant amounts of time and money will be saved. Choosing a site can be a slow, tedious, and expensive process. Since the land is already available these initial processes will be streamlined.

Additionally, locating the new facility on the DSCC campus permits sharing arrangements with the Department of Defense. Some arrangements could include access to childcare, fitness center, conferencing facilities, Department of Defense technology and multimedia support, building maintenance, as well as the continuation of their already existing agreement to provide dental services to active military personnel. These agreements will undoubtedly lead to further opportunities for the VA and DoD to assist each other in supporting their individual missions.

In my former role as Chairman of the Military Construction Subcommittee, I had the opportunity to visit a very successful sharing arrangement in South Texas with my good friend Congressman Ortiz. I saw first hand that these arrangements work; and if properly implemented, can be very beneficial to the VA, DoD, and especially taxpayers.

Once the proposed facility for at DSCC is complete, the 260,000 square feet, three-story facility will house a wide variety of new and expanded services that are not currently offered at the Chalmers P. Wylie facility. These new services will include: general ambulatory surgery, dialysis, pulmonary, orthopedic, nuclear medicine, and many more. Additionally, some services will be expanded beyond their current capabilities. They include oncology, podiatry, cardiology, optometry and radiology.

Other improvements will include increased parking availability, a single location for both administrative and clinical staff, expanded opportunities for resident rotations and research, and twelve twenty-three hour beds for recovery stays of less than a day.

In conjunction with this new clinic, it is imperative that the central market simultaneously addresses the inpatient hospital care access gap. There are many hospitals in the Columbus area, many of which have empty beds. I, along with others in the Ohio delegation, have written urging that an agreement exist with an area hospital to address these issues. Today, I am once again urging the VA to pursue a long-term contract with a local hospital willing to dedicate space to the veterans of Central Ohio.

IV.

At this point, I believe I have accurately demonstrated the need that exists for a new clinic to serve the veterans in the central market.

I strongly believe this facility must be accepted and included by the CARES Commission. I am confident that after you hear testimony from so many different and unique viewpoints, you will agree.

V.

While I believe this is the best route for this project, I am pleased to report that I have been using my position in Congress to authorize and fund it via the legislative process. In June, I introduced, along with Representatives Pryce, Tiberi, and other Members of the Ohio delegation, legislation that would authorize construction of the new facility.

Within one month, this proposal was identified as a priority by the Veterans' Affairs Committee; received a hearing at which several major veterans' groups and the Department of Veterans' Affairs went on record in support of the new facility; was approved by the full veterans' committee; and is now ready for action on the House Floor. Senators DeWine and Voinovich have introduced similar legislation in the Senate.

Additionally, I am pleased to report that on July 25, 2003, the U.S. House of Representatives approved the Fiscal Year 2004 VA, HUD and Independent Agencies Appropriations Act. Included in this bill is \$500,000 for the preliminary planning of the new Columbus facility. The report that accompanies this bill also includes language "strongly urging the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to continue negotiations with the Secretary of Defense to determine a suitable site on the DSCC campus for clinic construction."

VI.

In conclusion, it is vitally important that we move forward on this new facility as soon as possible.

As a veteran, I am proud to support this effort.

Abraham Lincoln, in his Second Inaugural Address in 1865, said that America would always "...care for him who shall have borne the battle."

Improving the health care facilities for veterans in Central Ohio will help fulfill this promise for the thousands of Americans who have faithfully served our country and secured the liberties we enjoy today.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify on before you today.
